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FOR COLLECTORS OF COINS, MEDALS, TOKENS AND PAPER MONEY



Coins, Collecting and Curators

by Barbara J. Gregory

The Numismatist

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An Unusual Alteration of a 1778 Virginia Bill

AMERICAN
PAPER MONEY

An unskilled but clever swindler changed a Virginia bill's denomination simply by removing a portion of the text.

by Eric P. Newman
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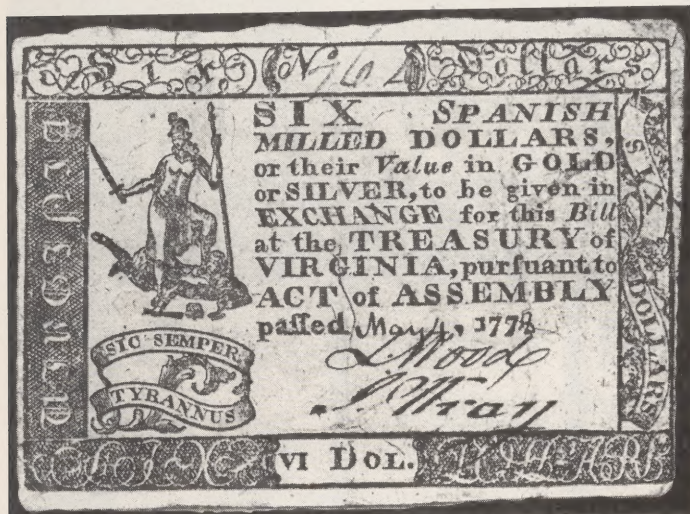
THROUGHOUT HISTORY, RAISING the denomination of circulating paper money by altering its text and counters has been a common criminal occupation. This practice usually has been undertaken by first removing some printed numbers and/or letters, then inscribing, imprinting and/or attaching elements of a higher denomination. This type of alteration was tedious, as it was undertaken on one genuine bill or note at a time. It was not as profitable as counterfeiting, which could yield many notes from one master form. However, alteration required little skill and minimal equipment, and it could be secretly undertaken anywhere.

In one remarkable instance in Virginia in 1778, some bills of one denomination were changed by rubbing off or scraping away a small amount of printed text, without making any additions. The process resulted in a bill that could easily pass for a larger denomination.

The small-sized Virginia bills (approximately 3 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches), printed on thick rag paper impregnated with blue fibers and mica flakes, were first issued pursuant to

Having to fill in just part of the date by hand on the pre-printed forms for the issue of October 20, 1777, reduced the time needed after authorization to prepare the notes for release.





When a new issue of Virginia bills was authorized on May 4, 1778, the date was completed and the serial numbers written in on the pre-printed notes on hand. These notes comprised only the first portion of the amount required to be issued.

lay in issuance: a supply of bills could be printed in advance of the date of authorization and then filled in and signed more promptly thereafter. Any printed bills in excess of the actual amount authorized could be retained for use in a subsequently authorized issue, at which time an appropriate date, along with the serial number and signature(s), could be written in. This was done again for the issue of October 20, 1777.

Currency paper generally was in short supply during the Revolutionary War and had to be sent to Williamsburg from Philadelphia, where Continental Currency consumed the bulk of production. After paper was ordered for the Virginia currency, the delivery time to Williamsburg was long and uncertain. When the May 4, 1778, issue was authorized, there remained some previously printed bills that had not been filled in, but not nearly enough to complete the issue. Those few available bills were completed by hand and issued.

The anticipated delay in obtaining paper gave the officials and the printer an opportunity to make changes to the design elements and text for the balance of the issue. The date of authorization was typeset in full to avoid the need for a portion of the date being filled in by hand. The long-standing misspelling TYRANNUS was corrected to TYRANNIS. Redesigned borders and arms were elaborately engraved by Robert Scot, who subsequently served as engraver at the United States Mint in Philadelphia (1793-1820).

For the first time in America, the newly prepared bills introduced "typeset" control (or check) letters to supplement the customary handwritten serial numbers on bills. Control letters performed an entirely different function from plate letters, the latter having been used on bills of other American colonies and states to distinguish between two or more bills of the same denomination included in the same printing

an Ordinance of July 17, 1775, and then followed by issues of bills of similar style authorized on May 6, 1776; October 7, 1776; May 5, 1777; October 20, 1777; May 4, 1778; October 5, 1778; and May 3, 1779. The total amount of each issue was established in the authorizations, but denominations were not specified.

The faces of bills were printed with black ink, and the backs were blank. The complete date was fully typeset until the May 5, 1777, issue, on which the partial year "177" was printed in the text so that the month, day and final number had to be inserted in ink by hand. This procedure eliminated a delay

THE SECOND TEXT line . . . naturally had DOLLAR in singular form, but the chances of someone noticing the lack of an “S” for the plural form was minimal . . .

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frame. Control letters distinguished batches of printed bills and simplified counting and auditing. From 1773 into 1776, the James River Bank notes and the Ashby engraved notes printed in England but completed and issued in Virginia contained handwritten batch numbering in addition to serial numbering, another paper money innovation in America.

The lowest denomination of the printed-date portion of the Virginia May 4, 1778, issue was one sixth of a dollar. The top line of its text lettering reads “ONE SIXTH of a” with the letters SIX in the center. This layout created an opportunity to eliminate a few letters on each side of the SIX and increase the bill’s apparent denomination 36 times—from \$ $\frac{1}{6}$ to \$6.¹

There were a few minor problems in creating such an alteration. All four new borders had ONE SIXTH OF A DOLLAR worked into their design, but the lettering on both side borders was engraved in very small, black capitals, and all lettering other than SIX and DOLLAR could easily be removed. The script ligature in the top and bottom borders, one being white with a black background, was so fancy as to be virtually unreadable. The second text line of the original bill, as well as its side borders, naturally had DOLLAR in singular form, but the chances of someone noticing the lack of an “S” for the plural form was minimal when the bill was returned to circulation.

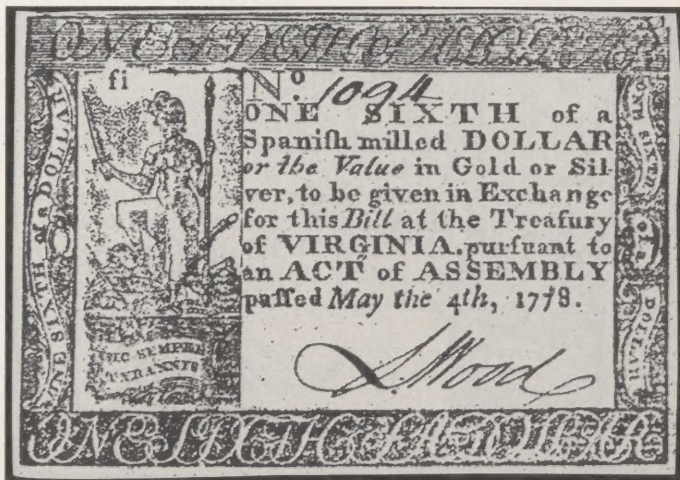
Another problem in altering such a bill was that it had only one signature, being all that was necessary under the legislation for denominations of \$1 and under, but two signatures were required for higher denominations. The public would normally overlook this technicality.

A possible reason why this alteration was not previously noticed was that there was little knowledge as to whether a genuine \$6 May 4, 1778, printed-date bill ever existed. A few examples of the \$6 from the partially written-date portion of the May 4, 1778, issue were known, but for the printed-date portion of the issue, the \$6 situation had escaped the attention of all previous collectors and writers, including this writer.

The text of the newly designed,

¹ The use of the \$ (dollar) sign for matters taking place in an area where the \$ sign had not yet been employed should be excused. To spell out “Spanish Milled Dollar(s)” is somewhat cumbersome.

The entire date was printed on the new notes produced to complete the authorized dollar amount of the issue of May 4, 1778. The lowest denomination in the issue was one-sixth of a dollar, spelled out at top center and on each of the four borders.



HOWEVER, ALL THE usual care had been taken to make the bills practical and attractive while attempting to deter counterfeiting and alteration.

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printed-date May 4, 1778, bills continued the use of many different fonts of individually set type to deter counterfeiting. Large and small bold-faced capitals—some vertical, some slanting right and some slanting left—were used intermittently in the text. Italics and normal-sized upper- and lower-case set type also were included. The spacing between words, as well as the typeset letters, often was somewhat irregular. However, all the usual care had been taken to make the bills practical and attractive while attempting to deter counterfeiting and alteration.

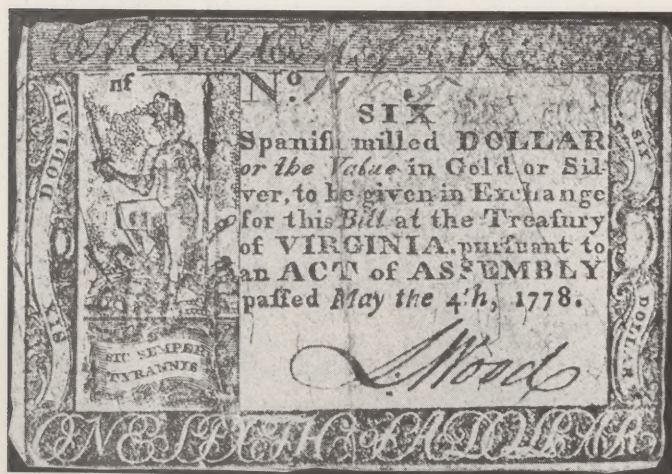
Like many other historical matters, this unusual alteration was discovered by serendipity. Howard W. Harner of Staunton, Virginia, who has been conducting archival research on the complex printing and issuing of Virginia bills during the Revolutionary War, was exchanging thoughts about them with this writer to determine all denominations of those bills and their positions on their printed sheets. From the few known full and partial sheets of Virginia small-sized bills of various issue dates and from the Virginia records, it was determined that ordinarily 10 bills were printed from a frame in two vertical rows of 5 subjects each. Alexander Purdie at Williamsburg was the printer.

It is not clear what the size of the original paper was and to what extent it was cut in half or in quarters for printing. The practice would depend on whether equal or different quantities of a high denominational group and a lower denominational group were desired. Virginia records refer to a "sheet" as containing 10 subjects, but when the paper was cut in half

vertically, the term "half sheet" was applied only to a strip of the larger denominations. A vertical strip of the same, half-sheet size but with lower denominations was defined as a "slip" and usually contained five subjects. One existing full-length, half sheet contains only four larger denominations in random order, indicating that in some instances the officials and the printer varied the quantity of selected denominations for convenience.

To determine whether there was a \$6 denomination in the printed-date portion of the May 4, 1778, issue, one must study the various denominations of issues before and after that date. The 10 known

A creative alteration raised the denomination of this note 36-fold—from \$ $\frac{1}{6}$ to \$6—simply by removing a few letters on either side of SIX in "ONE SIXTH of a."



denominations of bills issued under the Act of October 20, 1777, were $\$1/6$, $\$1/3$, $\$2/3$, $\$1$, $\$4$, $\$5$, $\$6$, $\$8$, $\$10$ and $\$15$, thus establishing the tradition of a $\$6$ bill. When the leftover bills of that same printed format were filled in with a partially written-in date for the first part of the May 4, 1778, authorization, a $\$6$ denomination would be expected and was included. However, when the newly designed format for the fully-printed-date portion of the May 4, 1778, authorization was prepared, for some reason several denominations were changed: $\$1/4$, $\$3$ and $\$7$ were added, and $\$4$, $\$6$ and $\$8$ eliminated. This is verified from existing bills and by sheet totals in the Virginia records.

In the next Virginia issue, dated October 5, 1778, the 10 small-sized bill denominations were identical to the 10 printed-date denominations of the May 4, 1778, issue and were produced from the same forms, except for the date change. Thus a $\$6$ denomination apparently was never prepared or issued under the printed-date part of the May 4, 1778, authorization, but used only during the written-date part of that issue. Thus the $\$1/6$ bill alteration described above was curiously converted into a nonexistent $\$6$ denomination.

To add to the confusion, the printer exhausted the supply of thick, impregnated paper while preparing the printed-date part of the May 4, 1778, issue and used thin, white paper to complete the dollar amount authorized. All subsequent Virginia issues were on thin, white paper. By the time of the issue of the May 3, 1779, authorization, inflation had made the five lower denominations impractical for circulation, and the only denominations of small-sized bills issued consisted of $\$3$, $\$5$, $\$7$, $\$10$ and $\$15$, again printed from the forms originally used for the May 4, 1778, printed-date issue (after a date change). There were no $\$6$ bills.

One may wonder why "ONE FOURTH of a" on the first text line of the May 4, 1778, printed-date Virginia $\$1/4$ bill was not altered to create a "FOUR" dollar bill. Apparently it was not as profitable as creating a "SIX" from "ONE SIXTH of a" with equal effort.

In colonial times, the punishment for counterfeiting sometimes was death. If someone by the name of Chad had been arrested and convicted of passing either such altered bill, "hanging Chad" would have resulted, anticipating a reoccurrence of that phenomenon in Florida by 222 years.

Acknowledgments

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A respected researcher and a member of the ANA Numismatic Hall of Fame, Eric P. Newman has received the highest honor of the ANA, the Farran Zerbe Memorial Award, as well as that of the American Numismatic Society, the Huntington medal. Among the numerous articles and books by the award-winning author is EARLY PAPER MONEY OF AMERICA.



Removing the letters "ONE" and "TH of a" from a $\$1/6$ bill required little skill and minimal equipment. No additions were needed to complete the altered denomination.